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September 29, 2005

Locks drain water from Mermentau Basin

Corps opens economically vital Intracoastal to barge tows

NEW ORLEANS – The Mermentau River Basin is being drained of Hurricane Rita floodwater through two locks on either side of the populated, 300,000-acre heart of Louisiana’s rice-growing and -milling industries.

The Leland Bowman Lock, south of Abbeville, and the Calcasieu Lock, at Lake Charles, “are operating in the ‘open pass’ mode with high current flowing out of the flooded Mermentau Basin,” the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said Thursday.

“Mariners are required to use assist vessels with not less than two vessels per tow when going against the current and when transiting the current, the New Orleans District said in Navigation Bulletin No. 05-60. <http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/navbulletins/Detail.aspx?ID=148>

Earlier, the Corps of Engineers in cooperation with towing-industry boats successfully tested navigation of the locks. Government-contracted tugs assisted vessels against the strong currents draining the Mermentau Basin.

Barge tows may transit 24 hours a day. The locks are on the economically important Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, which stretches from Brownsville, Texas, to Apalachicola, Fla.

The two locks were submerged in water by the Hurricane Rita storm surge that flooded the Mermentau Basin with salty water.

The lock gates were opened by rigging tractors and cables. At present the machinery will not function. The Corps is working to restore the locks to operation. Electrical systems and the motors require repair. It remained unclear when the gate-operating machinery could be returned to operation.

Water and mud are choking portions of the lock structures.

And the nearby Freshwater Bayou lock was opened to the “open pass” position Thursday. Vessels may transit from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with the same requirements of two assist boats per tow.

The lock is at the mouth of Freshwater Bayou at the Gulf of Mexico, south of the Leland Bowman Lock. It’s unclear when its gates can be returned to powered operation, as Rita’s floodwaters had reached the eaves of the locks control house.

Navigation <http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/od/navigation.asp>